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ABSTRACT

Literacy and illiteracy are cultural; the need to read, to write, and to compute comes from values placed on these functions by the cultural or social group in which one lives. They are also intergenerational. This intergenerational factor should be turned around so that parents transmit literacy to children. Illiteracy is also costly to society because of welfare and unemployment costs and low productivity of a population with low functional competence. The Adult Literacy Initiative launched by the President in 1983 calls on the Nation to support eight major initiatives in adult literacy--a national awareness campaign, the National Adult Literacy Project, governor-established adult literacy councils, assignment of Work-Study Program college students to adult tutoring, volunteer tutors, a national network of services to persons with disabilities, a Federal Employee Literacy Training Program, and private/public sector partnerships in literacy action programs. Seven major providers of adult literacy training or basic education are the state-administered adult education program, library system, voluntary sector, community-based providers, business and industry, prison system, and the military. Anyone can get involved in local school and library programs and local literacy councils, contact volunteer programs, or get data on needs and recruit tutors to meet them. (YLB)

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ADULT EDUCATION: THE FIGHT AGAINST ILLITERACY

by

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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This paper is based on remarks made in conducting a workshop on adult literacy at the Newspaper in Education Conference of the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation, March 22, 1984.

ADULT EDUCATION: THE FIGHT AGAINST ILLITERACY

by Jorie Lester Mark

GOOD morning...I can't tell you how delighted I am to be with you today. It's not often that a bureaucrat from Washington gets to talk personally to 40 newspaper people to try to sell them on a program.

The Problem

Let's start with functional literacy. You'll remember the old definition of literacy -- entailing reading, writing and 'rithmetic alone. We are not using that definition. What we are talking about instead is literacy that is functional -- that is usable in the society where we live.

Illiteracy is Cultural

In 1975 a team from the University of Texas at Austin got together to try to define illiteracy. Utilizing the best thinking of the field to date, the team suggested that literacy and illiteracy are socially determined, cultural. If you need to ride the bus, for example, you have to learn how to read a bus schedule. If you need to understand a legal decision, then you're going to have to know the context in which that decision was taken -- what the court system is like in which the decision was taken. And what the effect is of that legal decision.

Literacy, then is more than simply decoding letters or numbers. It is the application of a set of skills -- reading, writing, computing -- to a set of general knowledge areas. In our example above, it is applying reading, writing and, perhaps, computing skills to transportation and to law.

So the Texas team put together what is called "The APL (for Adult Performance Level) Model". This is a matrix of the things that Americans need to know--skills plus knowledge--in order to survive in our society. A copy of the matrix is attached.

Using this matrix, the Texas team went out in 1975 to survey a sample of the U.S. population to get data on adult literacy in the U.S. Projecting those statistics to today's population, we find that 27 million adults function with difficulty. Those are the APL-1's mentioned in the Texas study. And 47 million more Americans -- APL-2's -- function but not proficiently. That is a total of 74 million Americans who are not up-to-speed in the literacy skills needed in our society. This is so, even though, according to the experts, only 10 to 15 percent of our population has real trouble learning to read.

Let's look at the statistics from another angle:

- o We know that 61 million youth and adults don't have a high school diploma. That pool is increased every year when close to a million teenagers drop out of school.

- We find that 13 percent of white seventeen-year-olds are illiterate--56 percent of Hispanic seventeen-year-olds are illiterate--and 47 percent of Black seventeen-year-olds are illiterate. So are one-quarter of all Army recruits.

- By 1968, according to Community College experts, 50 percent of all Community College freshmen needed remedial education and of these 90 percent quit or dropped out before they could finish it.

- At the same time about one-fifth of people now lacking basic skills are over twenty-five years old.

Illiteracy is Intergenerational

So literacy and illiteracy are cultural: the need to read, to write, to compute, to understand grocery ads and want ads, and so on, come from values that are placed on these functions by the cultural or the social group or sub-group that we live in. If this is so, then illiteracy and literacy have to be inter-generational. Typically, according to our researchers, children from homes where parents are illiterate or marginally literate do not see any demonstrable need at home to read, to write, to compute. They often become the next generation of students who do poorly in school, who drop out and who become adult illiterates.

So illiterate parents beget illiterate children and this can go on for generations.

The trick is to try to turn this inter-generational factor around. We need to begin transmitting literacy instead of illiteracy from parent to child. And that is why parenting is an important subject in the field of adult learning.

Illiteracy is Costly

Now, what does the problem of illiteracy mean to us as a nation? That leads us to a third point: illiteracy is costly to the society.

What does it cost us as a Nation to keep all these illiterate folk:

- o We spend $6 billion a year in welfare and unemployment costs.

- o Since 1964 we have spent $65 billion dollars on training programs for unskilled youth. Yet today three-quarters of nation's unemployed have inadequate reading and writing skills. And over one-third of AFDC mothers are functionally illiterate.

- o Since 1965 we have spent some $1.2 billion in Federal funds and about $800 million in state and local funds -- a total of

$2 billion--on adult education for illiterate and those who need to get high school equivalency. Yet we have reached only a fraction of those in need.

- o Our yearly prison custodial bill is $6.5 billion dollars. Half of the prison inmates are functionally illiterate. Some 85 percent of the youngsters who go into juvenile court are functionally illiterate.

- o Over 75 percent of the Fortune 500 companies recently surveyed in a national study say they provide remedial programs to teach basic skills. There are only rough estimates of these direct or indirect costs, but the survey says the problem is at "crisis proportion".

- o Literacy Volunteers of America tells us that Americans without the basic skills forfeit some $237 billion in unrealized earnings every year.

There are also issues of productivity. While many illiterates are drop-outs, or unemployed, or poor, or convicts, there are also many employees who are illiterate or marginally literate. The issue is, of course, whether we can maintain our competitive advantage with foreign companies with a population whose functional competence is so low. One expert says that U.S. workers are only two-thirds as productive as their grand-parents were.

Who's Doing What About Literacy?

Recently, the problem came to the attention of the White House, and the President launched the Adult Literacy Initiative in a White House ceremony on September 7th, 1983. During that ceremony the President called on the Nation to support eight major initiatives in adult literacy:

The first is a national awareness campaign under preparation now by the Advertising Council which plans an all-media advertising campaign for newspapers, magazines, radio, television and transportation posters.

The second initiative is the National Adult Literacy Project. Close to a million dollars have been put up through the National Institute of Education for a research and development effort to support public and private organizations offering basic education.

The President also called on Governors to establish local and state adult literacy councils. Today, as far as we know, 109 councils have been established in 35 states. The most notable of these include the Philadelphia Literacy Council, the Kentucky Coalition on Literacy, the Indiana Adult Literacy Coalition.

Fourthly, the President asked the 3400 Colleges participating in the Work-Study Program to assign Work-Study students to adult tutoring rather than to the jobs they have heretofore been given. Today eighteen college Work-Study Programs around the country are developing models.

Additionally, the President called on college students and federal employees to get out there and volunteer to tutor adults in local programs wherever needed.

The President also asked for a national effort to network services to youth and adults with disabilities.

Seven, a Federal Employee Literacy Training Program will be established to add to the cadre of literacy volunteers.

Lastly, the President called on the private sector to help develop private/public sector partnerships in literacy action programs.

The President threw his support behind the Coalition for Literacy, an umbrella group set up in 1981 to broker action and awareness activities. The Coalition for Literacy has on its executive committee representatives from each of the major adult literacy delivery systems.

There are seven major providers of adult literacy training or basic education. Four have adult basic and secondary education as their primary thrust and, therefore, should put themselves out of business ultimately through their efforts. Three are providers only incidently to their main function.

Let's start with the formal providers:

The state-administered adult education program is perhaps the biggest provider. This delivery system serves 2.2 million participants each year, spending about $200 million in federal and state funds through schools, voluntary agencies, community colleges, vocational centers, churches, correctional institutions and other adult learning centers. Starting out in 1965 as a program serving primarily adults 25 to 65, age has shifted downward. Today 44 percent of participants are ages 16 to 24.

Second is the nation's library system. About $1.4 million in federal funds were spent in 1980 on 46 projects in 26 states. Among the most notable of these federal library programs are those in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Kentucky, California, New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

In 1981, the Libraries in Literacy project surveyed a sample of the 9,000 libraries across the nation, coming coming up with the following statistics:

- o 53 percent of libraries around the nation are involved in literacy activities;

- o of these, 27 percent are heavily involved in one-on-one tutorials, and

- o 81 percent provide more traditional items like space, materials, reference services.

The third major provider of adult literacy services is the voluntary sector. The major volunteer programs in adult literacy are Laubach Literacy, Literacy Volunteers of America, and the International Reading Association--all of which use tutors to teach basic skills one-on-one to adults. The College Work-Study Program mentioned above and the basic education services of church groups and service organizations are all included in this category. It is very hard to document data on how many such programs are in existence. One figure we have is that there are 2615 voluntary organizations and churches around the country providing literacy services. I suspect there are many more.

The fourth major delivery system for literacy services are the community based providers. These are locally-based community organizers or developers who perhaps provide literacy training for upwards of twelve or fifteen people each, often in a single section of a city or town. The one in Washington, D.C., is called "PUSH Literacy Action Now." But you've no doubt got one or more community-based literacy group in your community. These are the hardest to get data on. The national Association for Community-Based Education tries to keep up with these organizations. According to ACBE there are, nationally, some 5,000 community-based programs.

In addition, because the literacy needs of our society are not now being adequately met, other delivery systems are taking on basic education as a task that is incidental to their primary functions:

One is business and industry. As indicated above, 75 percent of the 2000 companies surveyed last year by the Center for Public Response provide remedial education to their employees. JTPA, the Jobs Training Partnership Act, is preparing one million workers a year for jobs. Basic education is an intergral part of every one of these programs. Another estimate is that 3221 organizations, categorized as business and industry, vocational-technical institutes, manpower trainers and unions, are providing basic skills training. Some companies are funding literacy programs for their communities and the nation. B. Dalton Booksellers, for example, will spend $3 million during the next 3 years on adult literacy training and advocacy. The life and health insurance industries are also committed to basic education for their employees, and the American Council of Life Insurance is mounting a major awareness effort across the nation.

Another provider of literacy services as a tangential activity is the nation's prison system. We know that the Feds spend something like $5 million a year providing literacy services to prison inmates in the Federal system.

Lastly, the military is a very large provider of basic education to its personnel. In 1980 the nation spent $70 million to provide fifty-nine million hours to teach 210,000 soldiers how to read.

Yet all of these current literacy efforts combined are reaching less than 4 percent of those in need, according to a recent Ford Foundation

study which estimates that we may need as much as $5 billion dollars to solve the problem. Harold McGraw, Chairman of McGraw Hill, has recently put up $1 million dollars of his personal money to set up the "Business Council for Effective Literacy" which is inquiring into national needs and how best to meet them.

What Can You Do?

What can you do to get into the picture or to find out what is going on? The Clearinghouse for the Coalition on Literacy is called CONTACT. CONTACT's telephone number is 800-228-8813 I urge you to call CONTACT for information on your local area activities and needs.

The Education Department's clearinghouse in Washington is called the Clearinghouse on Adult Education. The number is 202-245-0691. The Secretary's Adult Literacy Initiative also takes networking phone calls. Their number is 202-472-9020.

Now, what can you do? There are a host of things you can do. I thought I would come up with just a few ideas that relate to you as newspaper people, perhaps not specifically as Newspaper in Education people.

First and foremost, get involved personally with your local school and library programs and your local literacy councils. If your community has no literacy council, help set one up.

Secondly, contact your churches, United Way, or local service organizations. Ask volunteer programs in your community for information on community-based programs. Or put an ad or box on the front page of your newspaper asking community-based providers to contact you.

Thirdly, get data from your local employers, from your schools, libraries and volunteer programs on what the needs are in your community and what your resources are.

Then help recruit tutors locally to begin to meet those needs.

Help break the illiteracy cycle in your own community by recruiting both teachers and learners -- and then assuring they connect up in a supportive setting where basic education can be given to all who want and need it.

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE AREAS

SKILLS	Consumer Economics	Occupational Knowledge	(Safety and) Health	Community Resources	Government & Law
Reading	Reading a newspaper grocery ad	Reading a newspaper help-wanted ad	Reading and interpreting a health insurance policy	Reading a movie schedule	Reading a pamphlet on an individual's rights after arrest
Writing	Writing a grocery list				
Speaking, Listening	Listening to an advertisement on the radio		Performance Requirements		
Computation	Computing the unit price of a grocery item				
Problem-Solving	Determing the best stores to shop in				

The APL Model of Functional Competency

Biographic Statement

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